Organization Pride: Virtue or Vice?

Maurice A. Buford

1107 Blue Wing Terrace
Upper Marlboro MD, 20774
MauriceBuford@aol.com
757.513.4737

Regent University
Abstract

Practically everyday, the news reports of another corporation either filing bankruptcy or a leader being removed from position. Collins’ (2010) research confirms the same and further suggests that the common denominator of such demise is hubris born of success. This form of pride seemingly contaminates cultures and destroys overall morale. But is pride always problematic? This paper endeavors to understand such an inquiry as well as comprehend the lingering effects of conceit within an organization. While utilizing an analysis of the life of King Nebuchadnezzar, virtuous and vicious pride is examined.
A high level analysis of today’s organizational cultures may reveal elements of double-entendres. According to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, a double-entendre is a word or phrase open to two interpretations, one of which is indecent. As nations still recover from the effects of corporate meltdowns, one such double-entendre that warrants further exploration is the term pride. The citizens within organizations, for example, often invoke such a term in a positive light when they suggest to others, “I am proud of my team.” On the other hand, when a firm embraces an overbearing belief of self-importance, it can quickly lead to an array of issues.

In light of the above assertion, four key questions emerge. They include, what exactly is the difference, if any, between “good” and “bad” pride? What are the symptoms of each at an organizational level? What are the indicators that may suggest a firm is moving from good to bad pride? How can leadership correct a culture that is plagued with toxic organizational pride? While employing biblical exegetical methods, such inquires will be confronted by exploring the deliberations of King Nebuchadnezzar. Additionally, a review of the literature of leadership will be delineated to substantiate or refute various themes. This manuscript will conclude with practical recommendations to transform organizational culture.

**Without A Vision**

Arguably the prelude to any form of significance begins with one’s ability to dream bold dreams. Stated another way, the significance of an entity can be directly linked to its vision. Nanus (1998) suggest that vision is a beckoning symbol of all that is possible for the organization – a shining destination, a distinctive path that no other organization is likely to have, even one that may be in the very same business (p.231). Nanus continues by asserting that there are five benefits of having a dream. They include:

1. Vision creates meaning for everyone in the organization.
2. Vision provides a worthwhile challenge.
3. Vision energizes all in involved.
4. Vision brings the future into the present.
5. Vision creates a common identity.
The ensuing dream of King Nebuchadnezzar can possibly shed light upon Nanus’ (1998) assertion as well as unearth a model to better understand “good pride” at an organizational level. The king states:

The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these: I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth; and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were fair and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the air dwelt in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it (Dan. 4:10–12 RSV).

The above pericope, as depicted in figure 1, outlines five components that could possibly escort an entity into a place of good pride. Good pride can be defined as a set of healthy emotions a person or entity experiences upon bringing to pass in an ethical manner a set of objectives that originated from a compelling vision. The first element can be abstracted from verse 10b, “...I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth...”

**Entrepreneurship**

A possible inference that one can take from the phrase “tree in the midst of the earth...” is that a seed was planted and it broke through the earth after a period
of germination. This notion of breaking through or into something may have overlaps with the construct known as entrepreneurship. Tan (2002), Davidsson and Wiklund (2001) argue that entrepreneurship is the process of creating something new or different that has inherent value. Such significances may lead to the development of new products or organizational entities.

Like a seed in the germination process, entrepreneurs maintain a unique set of attributes. Yoo (2001) explains that such traits include not being afraid to take risk, being a bold innovator, and keeping a proactive outlook on engagements. This mindset, arguably, is not the norm in today's society. As such, when others witness this phenomenon of courageously breaking through uncharted grounds, humanity tends to pause and take note. The feelings affiliated with standing upon new grounds after a period of sweat, blood, and tears is indeed invigorating.

**Influence**

The second possible contributing factor of good pride can be found within verse 11a. The text resonates that, "...the tree grow and became strong.” Metaphorically, this phrase seems to highlight a relationship between organizational growth and influence. Influence can be defined as power in action or a transaction in which person B is induced by person A to behave in a certain way (Invancevich, et. al., 2005, p. 387).

The question now becomes, how does one obtain this power in action? Johnson (2009) suggests that there are five key ways to obtain pull. First, one can achieve influence by usage of penalties or punishments. This type of control is known as coercive power. At this place a person might invoke physical force or intimidation to become the decision maker. The next form of authority is reward power. This form of clout is usually achieved by delivering tangible (i.e. bonus) or intangible (i.e. trust) gestures to others. Additionally, Johnson argues that influence can be inquired through legitimate power. Legitimate power points to the authority one receives by position. Furthermore, Johnson contends that one can arise to power based upon knowledge, skills or education in a particular area. This can be referred to expert power.
The final form of influence acquiring is known as referent power. Johnson (2009) suggests that influence at this place is won out of admiration. Due to this awe, people willingly purchase products, follow, and support. Perhaps this form of influence is what one gains after successfully breaking out or into an emerging field (i.e. entrepreneurship). Regardless of how one achieves influence, it appears that the sentiment of Senator William Learned Marcy adequately depicts the benefits of having an entrepreneur spirit. While reflecting upon the political victory of President Andrew Jackson, Marcy (stated by Stover, 2004) coined the expression, “To the victor belong the spoils.” The victor, in this case, can possibly refer to the successfulness of a person or entity to break through or into uncharted grounds.

**Marketability**

The third possible factor of good pride can be found within verse 11b. This passage indicates that, “…and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth.” This notion of reaching heaven and being visible may have similarities with the construct known as marketing. Colbert (2007) states that marketing is the art of understanding the consumers, how they make decisions and what motivates them. Upon understanding such drivers, a good marketing strategy typically is undergirded with an effective distribution network and an innovative communication package.

The “buzz” created through marketing is typically short lived divorced from credibility or having a good brand. To this end, firms that invest time transparently wrestling with relevant marketing models tend to flourish. Spear’s et al. (2006) model is a case in point. They suggest that credible organizations constantly ponder four questions. They include:

1. Who are we as a corporation?
2. What does the corporation want others to think about the corporation?
3. What does the corporation believe others think of the corporation?
4. What do stakeholders actually think of the corporation?

The sum total of the above inquiries coupled with an aggressive implementation strategy will arguably result in maximum visibility. Such notoriety can potentially contribute to the overall psychological emotion of good pride.
Sustainability

The fourth possible factor of organizational good pride can be found within verse 12a. The text declares, “Its leaves were fair and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all.” This verse can also be framed as corporate sustainability. Wilson (2003) argues that corporate sustainability recognizes that corporate growth and profitability are important, it also requires the corporation to pursue societal goals, specifically those relating to sustainable development — environmental protection, social justice and equity, and economic development (p.1).

This notion of going beyond making a profit only thinking is perhaps the very thing that creates a win – win. In other words, the bottom line, though important, is not main thing. Rather assuring the environment is properly managed, community equity is the order of the day, and that entire region is empowered is the goal. Such an approach can possibly create “food for all.” In today’s context this could translate into jobs, healthcare, a good education or acquiring tools to care for one’s life.

A shining example of corporate sustainability is Ben & Jerry. The American based ice cream firm is leading the industry in every sense of the word. Richards (2002) explains that this beyond the bottom line thinking firm:

- Was an original scoop shop made of recycled materials;
- Went “green” in 1989 with a heavy company focus on environmental education;
- Company bus is equipped with solar panels;
- The firm uses hormone-free milk in its products;
- They maintain a commitment to reduce waste and to recycle.

The reality of the above achievements coupled with their staggering profits (326 million in 2000) is a possible explanation of the high morale and the sense of organizational commitment (i.e. good pride) among the employees.

Altruism

The last likely component of organizational good pride is discovered in verse 12b. The word indicates, “…The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the air dwelt in its branches…” This notion of providing shade or comfort for the metaphorical “beast and birds” can be framed as altruism. Batson et al (2002) suggest
that, “if one’s ultimate goal in benefiting another is to increase the other’s welfare, then
the motivation is altruistic.” Moreover, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines altruism
as an unselfish regard for or devotion to the welfare of others.

When an organization “provides shade” to others, they literally fulfill the teaching
of Jesus the Christ as recorded in Acts 20:35c, “It is more blessed to give than to
receive.” This notion of giving may result in a blessing (i.e. feelings of good pride) of
knowing that you help to bring positive relief to someone in need. Though altruism may
not be apart of the ethos of various organizations, those that embrace tend to outshine
others.

A case in point of such an assertion is the American based company – Huntsman
Chemical Corporation. According to Mitroff and Denton (1999), this company
employees some 10,000 employees and has denoted over $100 million to various
charities. This selfless gesture of altruism is an intangible reason for high productivity,
elevated morale and a possible evidence of the value of this trait in the workplace.

The Good

To recap, good pride can be defined as a set of healthy emotions a person or
entity experiences upon bringing to pass in an ethical manner a set of objectives that
originated from a compelling vision. Some of the factors that contribute to
organizational good pride include being entrepreneurial or being able to successfully
break into or through a field. Second, the ability to effectively manage the influence
or power that is often affiliated with having an entrepreneurial nature is critical.
Third, when an organization becomes a “house hold name” and projects a marketing
strategy that constantly learns, it effortlessly elevates group-efficacy. Fourth, it was
established that firms that embrace a corporate sustainability posture, like Ben &
Jerry, have a reason to feel esteemed. Finally, it was unearthed from Daniel 4:12b
that organizational altruism was a contributing factor of healthy pride.

I Know It When I see It

There seems, however, to be a thin line between good and bad organizational
pride. This invisible place can potentially be difficult to detect and even more
damaging to a firm if leadership fails to heed the possible warning signs. Due to the
limited to silent research on this issue, it is as if entities have settled on an "I will
know it when I see it” approach to business. This phrase is often credited to Justice Potter Stewart as he deliberated on defining obscenities in the media. Though such articulation is self evident, it may be too late once it surfaces. To this end, the question now becomes, “What are the indicators that may suggest a firm is moving from good to bad pride?” Daniel 3: 1-6 can help the reader understand some possible patterns. Observe:

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits. He set it up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. 2 Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent to assemble the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. 3 Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces, were assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. 4 And the herald proclaimed aloud, “You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, 5 that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up; 6 and whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.”

Figure 2 The Warning signs of Bad Organizational Pride
The Building Of Organizational Monuments

As depicted in Figure 2, the first possible sign of bad pride is when organizations began to overtly build monuments unto themselves. This obsession with the worship of self can also be framed as narcissism. Narcissism can be defined as a personality syndrome that includes several traits relevant to effective leadership, such as a strong need for esteem (e.g., prestige, status, attention, admiration, adulation), a strong personalized need for power, and low emotional maturity and integrity (Yulk, 2010, p. 204).

Moreover, Yulk (2010) contend that narcissist people are often preoccupied with establishing their power, status, and control over others. They have unhealthy fantasies of success and power that usually equates to others worshiping their positions as well as their egos. Such a disposition, unfortunately, propels such leaders to surround themselves with subordinates who are loyal and uncritical of their deliberations (Yulk, 2010, p. 205).

Arguably the above attributes can be found in Daniel 3: 1-5. Lederach (1994) submits that Nebuchadnezzar wanted to unify and fortify his fragile empire in which many cultures, faiths, and ideologies dwelt. Lederach further suggests that Nebuchadnezzar believed that the building of a monument, that mandated others to worship, could reunite his organization. In other words, this narcissist leader believed that if others would only come stroke his ego and appease his need for admiration, his entity would flourish.

Zero Defects

The second order of effect that may be affiliated with narcissism is the creation of a zero defects atmosphere. According to Schloesser (2008), a zero defects philosophy essentially penalizes one for making mistakes. Harvey (1988) suggest that when we make it difficult for organization members to acknowledge their mistakes and have them forgiven, we have designed organizations that reduce risk taking, encourage lying, foment distrust, and, as a consequence, decrease productivity (p. 59).

This type of atmosphere is debatably what inspired Nebuchadnezzar to issue a standing zero defects order. More specifically, this leader threatens his followers
by saying that, “...whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.” Though such an order may yield a high initial compliance rate, it may also produce an increase of ethical incidents. In light of this reality, Harvey (1989) makes several recommendations to proactively mitigate the traits affiliated with a zero defects climate. They include:

1. Provide routine means to wipe the slate clean periodically, removing adverse personnel actions from employees’ files.
2. Celebrate formal ceremonies of grace (i.e. the willingness to give up resentment… or claim to requital)
3. Provide training programs that reacquaint and instruct us in the fine art of apology and in the more difficult art of learning to accept apologies – with grace (p. 72).

Petty Infighting

When the above recommendations are absent from organizational discourse, petty infightings may become the norm. This third attribute of corporate bad pride can also be framed as recrimination. Adizes (1996) suggest that at this place entity’s often go on witch-hunts to find out who did wrong rather than try to discover what went wrong and how to fix it. Additionally, Adizes maintains that backstabbing and turf wars are the standard. This petty infighting, unfortunately, may be largely driven by insecurities and jealousies.

Three foreign members of Nebuchadnezzar’s organization understood intimately the effects of being on the receiving side of petty infighting. In Daniel 3:8 the text informs the readers that, “Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews.” Lederach (1994) suggest that the Chaldeans (or professional astrologers) secretly resented the skills of the new employees on the block. As of a result, the Chaldeans took the liberty to backstab Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego all in the name of exalting themselves. Perhaps, this same behavior can possibly be seen in a contemporary context. Some examples may include (1) toxic politicking (2) fights over office and parking spaces and (3) various sabotaging behaviors.

Such petty infighting, if left unchecked, often results in firm members being thrown under the proverbial bus. In the case of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego,
the executive leadership decided to put these followers into a fiery furnace. But because these followers did not embrace the tactics of this organization and largely due to their spirituality, they were able to literally escape the flames. Observe the reaction of the executive leadership in Daniel 3:21-25:

Then these men were bound in their mantles, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were cast into the burning fiery furnace. 22 Because the king’s order was strict and the furnace very hot, the flame of the fire slew those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. 23 And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace. 24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He said to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered the king, “True, O king.” 25 He answered, “But I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like the Son of God.”

There are two possible lessons organizational members can abstract from the above text. First, petty infighting may have short-term effects on immediate policies but it will never triumph over hard working principled members. Secondly, it would serve both the organization as well as the members to proactively decide that they cannot be bought nor will they compromise their integrity. Taking such a stand may not always be easy but it will be worth it!

**Cynicism Over Spirituality**

The fourth possible symptom of organizational bad pride can be abstracted from Daniel 4:27 – 28. In prior verses the passage indicates that the king was troubled over a daunting dream because he could not interpret it. As a result, the king summoned for Daniel and this servant declared:

Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you; break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your tranquillity.” 28 All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar.

The advice given to the king was of a spiritual nature. Vaill (1996) suggests that, “Spirituality is a decision to search somewhere else than in findings defined as scientific and their derived practices, in secular support systems, in positive addictions like aerobic exercise, or in any other man-made doctrines and
technologies that purport to offer answers.” Though Nebuchadnezzar listened to the spiritual counsel of Daniel, he chose rather to embrace cynicism.

Cynicism for this article is defined as a pessimistic attitude or jaded negativity, especially a general distrust of the integrity or professed motives of others. In the case of the king, he decided to stroll on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon rather than walk in the truth of God’s precepts. When this form of behavior occurs, it can possibly advocate toxicity at every level. More specifically, erroneous slanders against team members emerge as well as a deep seeded mistrust may become the order of the day.

The Glory Days

Arguably this cynicism blurs the forward thinking of executive leadership and consequently the organization begins to over romanticize the “glory days.” Adizes (1989) suggest that at this place entities lower expectations for growth, have fewer hopes for new markets and obsess on past achievements instead of future visions. Moreover, Adizes contend that such firms become suspicious of change and reward followers who do what they are told as oppose to innovators.

This fixation with the good old glory days can be seen in the organizational behavior of king Nebuchadnezzar. Notice the content of his question in Daniel 4:29 – 30:

At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 30 and the king said, “Is this not magnificent Babylon, which I have built as a royal capital by my mighty power and for my glorious majesty?”

When leaders think within the context of the above line of inquiry, policies, climate, and the overall culture receives a subtle message - we value the past more than progression. This approach to business defends the status quo and breeds a spirit of stagnation that may ultimately lead to irrelevance.

Organizational Learning Disability

A status quo approach to business can potentially stifle an entities ability to learn. Such firms, according to Senge (1990), suffer from an organizational learning disability (LD). This inability to receive, adapt, and embrace knowledge at all levels has several symptoms. Some of the indicators include:

1. Leadership fails to separate their professional positions from personal.
2. Leadership cultivates a culture amongst the team that conveys, “The enemy is out there.
3. Leadership operates under an illusion of taking charge.
4. Leadership becomes overly fixated on events
5. Leadership becomes the epitome of the parable of the boiling frog (Note: a frog does not realize he is being cook due to the inability to discern that the water has changed).
6. Leadership fails to learn from past experience.

In the case of Nebuchadnezzar, he seemingly suffered from Senge’s (1990) notion of a learning disability. He failed to learn from the experiences of God delivering his employees from the fiery furnace as well as the loin dens. Moreover, he just didn’t get the fact that times were different and if he stayed upon such a pathway of refusing to learn, his entire firm could suffer.

**A Haughty Culture**

Perhaps the leading symptom of problematic pride is haughtiness. At this place, to recap a previous point, leadership constantly steals credit from followership and endeavors to exalt themselves in a spirit of entitlement. Additionally, they often have no regard for things that don’t promote their selfish agenda. Notice the haughtiness that King Nebuchadnezzar created in Dan. 4:28-32:

All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. 29 At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 30 and the king said, “Is this not magnificent Babylon, which I have built as a royal capital by my mighty power and for my glorious majesty?” 31 While the words were still in the king’s mouth, a voice came from heaven: “O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: The kingdom has departed from you! 32 You shall be driven away from human society, and your dwelling shall be with the animals of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like oxen, and seven times shall pass over you, until you have learned that the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals and gives it to whom he will”

The above actions of Nebuchadnezzar went against Hickman’s (2001) findings of followers wanting their leaders to be less of a hero and more of a hero maker. Instead of exalting others, he rather chose to believe that Babylon became great due to the singular efforts of his own hands. This ideology, unfortunately, usually is the prelude to demise. Solomon captures this principle within Proverbs 16:18 when he wrote, “…and a haughty
spirit comes before a fall.” In the case of Nebuchadnezzar, the question becomes, “what was the verdict of a haughty culture?” Seemingly an answer becomes that the organization’s influence becomes minimized, productivity plummets, and the firm enters into a season of utter organizational insanity.

**Transforming A Haughty Organization**

How can an entity recover from the effects of an organization that is plagued with negative pride? Since everything rises and falls on leadership (Maxwell, 1998), a manager should consider first moving from being a haughty minded influencer to being a servant leader. Pressfield (1998) describes the role of servant in the book *Gates of Fire*. He states that servants, particularly in the midst of chaos, carry a greater burden. He indicates (Note: the term king is replaced with the word leader):

> I will tell His majesty what a leader is. A leader does not abide within his tent while his men bleed and die upon the field. A leader does not dine while his men go hungry, nor sleep when they stand at watch upon the wall. A leader does not command his men’s loyalty through fear not purchase it with gold; he earns their love by the sweat of this own back and the pains he endures for their sake. That which comprises the harshest burden, a leader lifts first and sets down last. A leader does not require service of those he leads but provides it to them. He serves them, not they him (p. 360).

The above sentiments suggest that the intent of leadership is to serve their followers and put the needs of the organization on the periphery. This form of managing mandates humility and can possibly plant of seed of transformation deep within the heart of a firm.

Since one of the roles of a leader is to define reality (Depree, 1990), executives can secondly utilize their influence to renovate attitudes about learning at an organizational level. A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights. Learning organizations have several characteristics. Some of them include:

1. **Systematic Problem solving.** At this point, one relies on the scientific method not guess work; data not assumptions and simple statistical tools.
2. **Experimentation or the systematic searching for and testing of new knowledge.**
3. **They embrace creative tension as a source of energy and renewal.**
4. **They are continuously aware of and interact with their environment.**
5. **They foster inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people share openly and take risks.**
(6) Learning from experiences is a norm.
(7) Learning from others is expected.
(8) The transference of knowledge is applauded.

Revising a culture to embrace such principles with adult learning can generate a level of instant success much like experience when virtues pride was paramount.
Organizational Pride: Virtue or Vice?

Reference


